

# **‘Don’t use “the weak word”’: Women brewers, identities and gendered territories of embodied work\***

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## **Abstract**

Focusing on an unresearched group of women brewers, and drawing conceptually on embodiment and identity work, this article explores worker corporealities within the gendered landscape of microbreweries and deepens understanding of the body/work/gender nexus in the context of brewer’s work. In doing so, it challenges the marginalisation of female worker bodies in scholarly work on male-dominated occupations. Drawing on interview and observation data collected in the UK in 2015, verbal narratives of women brewers’ experiences of their working lives are utilised to provide insights into how their gendered bodily practices constitute resources for constructing a distinctive ‘brewster’ identity. Women brewers engage in identity work, on both individual and collective levels, through the material and symbolic framing of their embodied and gendered working selves; navigating their physical working environments; *downplaying* gender to emphasise physical competence; and *foregrounding* gender in relation to non-physical aspects to accentuate difference and collective contribution.

## **Keywords**

Body/work nexus; Brewers; Embodiment; Gender; Identity work; Male-dominated; Microbrewing; Women

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### **Introduction**

Bodies of workers have received relatively limited attention in the sociology of work and sociology of the body as well as in research on organisations, work and employment (Hassard et al., 2000; Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2009; McDowell, 2009; Wolkowitz, 2006), and more specifically within research on occupational identities (Courpasson and Monties, 2017). Comparatively few accounts of paid work provide a ‘fleshy’ perspective on working bodies (Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2009: 218), and particularly how working bodies are gendered (Haynes, 2012). Thus, there is a need to deepen conceptualisation of gendered working environments and understandings of women’s identity work in physically demanding male-dominated occupations. Although more studies have attempted to redress this (Mik-Meyer, Roelsgaard Obling and Wolkowitz, 2018) and make the often absent, ‘naturalised and taken for granted’ bodies more visible (Wolkowitz, 2006: 55), female workers’ bodies continue to be under-researched. When it comes to work requiring physical exertion, the focus has been mainly on masculine bodies, such as firefighters (Thurnell-Read and Parker, 2008), largely

overlooking the significance of the corporeality of women workers in male-dominated occupations requiring physical work and those outside of feminised occupations involving body work (Cohen and Wolkowitz, 2018; Holmes, 2015; Wolkowitz, 2006).

In seeking to examine how women, individually and collectively, navigate these workplaces and negotiate their work identities, this article contributes to the stream of research on identity construction and women in male-dominated occupations involving physical work. Existing research on identity construction of women in male-dominated occupations largely focuses on discursive tactics and responses to workplace interactions, and on individual rather than collective aspects of identity construction (e.g. Hatmaker, 2013; Rabe-Hemp, 2008; Smith, 2013). Women in male-dominated environments face unique challenges and revert to distinct coping strategies to negotiate occupational identity (Hatmaker, 2013). Bodily performance can be influential in the construction of worker identity (Courpasson and Monties, 2017; Monaghan, 2002) and rich insights from an exploration of the body/work nexus can be gained (Wolkowitz, 2006). To date, research conducted on women in male-dominated environments has largely centred on women in large organisations (Denissen, 2010; Rabe-Hemp, 2008; Woodfield, 2016) rather than in niche sectors. Yet, niche working environments increasingly offer novel opportunities to examine women's embodied and gendered experiences.

The past decade saw substantial expansion in microbreweries, with the UK – 2,198 microbreweries in 2016 compared to 778 in 2010 – now having the highest number of microbreweries in Europe (The Brewers of Europe, 2017). The term 'microbrewery' has been in use since 1970s and is understood as a locally-orientated independently run small-scale business (Thurnell-Read, 2014). The sector is considered niche, enterprising and collaborative,

with low barriers to entry and breweries competing on quality (Danson et al., 2015). Microbrewing is a significantly under-researched area (Danson et al., 2015; Schnell and Reese, 2003). Studies in the area predominantly adopt a 'consumption focused approach' where the final product is given priority over the worker (Thurnell-Read, 2014). An exception is Thurnell-Read's (2014) exploration of brewing as craftwork, which highlights the importance of tangibility in brewer's work, although it overlooks the gendered dimension of the role.

Historically, brewing was done by women – known as brewsters – but as beer production rose in status, the occupation became male-dominated (Bennett, 1996). Yet, its gendered and embodied nature has received limited sociological exploration. Despite increasing numbers of women entering the industry, they still represent an overwhelmingly low proportion of brewers and the industry remains male-dominated. Precise data on female brewers is difficult to establish as available statistics are gender-blind, reinforcing the invisibility of women. The UK Society of Independent Brewers states that of those directly employed in the industry, one in four employees are women (Cabras, 2015). However, this does not specify roles, which could range from sales to delivery and brewing, indicating that the actual number of women brewers is lower.

Focusing on the experiences of a previously unresearched group of women brewers, referring to themselves collectively as 'brewsters', this article captures their working lives and the framing of a distinctive brewster identity on individual and collective levels. This is important in the context of the changing nature of employment in contemporary Britain, with the revival of craft businesses (Holmes, 2015) and women's increasing participation in these. Drawing on the concepts of identity work (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrick, 1996; Snow and Anderson, 1987; Watson, 2008), embodiment (Burkitt, 1999) and body/work nexus

(Wolkowitz, 2006), the research question centres on how women brewers engage in identity work and what role bodily practices and gendered expectations play in the process of identity construction within the context of a male-dominated occupation in a niche sector. Through exploring this question, the article contributes to understanding how women in male-dominated occupations involving physical work and within niche sectors engage in identity work, negotiate their suitability, and the discourse they create around their working bodies and their gendered selves.

### **Body/work/gender nexus and identity work**

It has been argued that in post-industrial Western economies and knowledge-based societies, the worker body is no longer the central focus (Casey, 1995), downgraded in importance as occupations move away from manual labour. Despite this, bodies remain central to the embodied experiences of workers and identity construction, and are entwined in the working condition (Wolkowitz, 2006). Bodies of workers can be productive and powerful; they can empower, constrain or exhaust the worker; and they can be used to display both conformity and non-conformity to gendered social norms (Haynes, 2012). Yet, when worker corporeality is discussed in the context of physical work, it is often the body of the male worker, emphasising what Wolkowitz (2006: 16) describes as ‘the strength, skill and masculine presence of the male working body’. Conversely, women’s bodies have been marginalised by culture and design from non-feminised occupations, and industrial terrains remain gendered, with machinery and tools designed around masculine dimensions, such as arm span (Cockburn, 1983; Smith, 2013; Wolkowitz, 2006).

Brewing is considered craftwork (Thurnell-Read, 2014). With bodies of workers integral to the work performed, craftworkers invest their selves into their products and form a unique

relationship with their tools (Holmes, 2015; Sennett, 2008; Thurnell-Read, 2014). Craftwork is often idealised as giving workers more control over their work and requires creativity both in terms of making something novel as well as in ‘a more mundane sense of creating something from base ingredients’ (Thurnell-Read, 2014: 47). Yet, when discussing craftwork and craftworkers’ identities, the focus is mainly on typically male skills as the reference point. Indeed, Sennett’s (2008) work focuses on male-oriented occupations, representing ‘the archetypal male craftsman’, with craftworkers seen as primarily male figures, resulting in the contribution of female craftworkers being undervalued (Holmes, 2015: 483). By focusing on women working in an occupation associated with male craftsmanship, this study seeks to redress this.

In male-dominated occupations, women attempting recognition as skilled have to confront ‘the context-specific, socio-political construct of men as the “ideal type” of worker and women as the “wrong” sex’ (Hatmaker, 2013: 383). Masculine bodies, by virtue of their dominance, gain a level of invisibility which further emphasises women’s bodies as divergent from salient gender characteristics (Woodfield, 2016). For example, in operational roles in the fire service, women’s bodies are assessed against the ideal template of firefighters’ embodied masculinity and subjected to the scrutiny of their physicality (Woodfield, 2016). Despite excellent physical performance, women firefighters feel under greater pressure than men to demonstrate their physical capabilities as they want to ‘avoid the undesirable fate of achieving heightened visibility as a woman, but lowered visibility as a skilled worker’ (Woodfield, 2016: 252). Uniforms can help reduce the perception of difference (Woodfield, 2016), but also highlight difference when unsuited for female bodies.

While the number of women entering male-dominated occupations has increased in past decades, the gender balance continues to be weighted towards male workers, with women, as those in minority, having to gain acceptance by those in the majority (Watts, 2007) and negotiate their occupational identities in situ. Finding themselves moving between various forms of masculine identity, they can experience issues of sexism (Smith, 2013), safety and sexual harassment, and thus move 'between the contradictions of on one level being a physical spectacle, to being ignored and culturally invisible on another' (Watts, 2007: 307). Women in manual trades face displays of sexism from co-workers and engage with emotion work to cope with gendering practices (Smith, 2013). Under pressure to prove themselves and work harder, they feel hyper-surveilled due to a disbelief that they could do the physical work and have to learn the language of masculinity (Smith, 2013).

Professional identity in male-dominated occupations is not gender-neutral and is constantly negotiated. For example, faced with adversity, women engineers adopt coping strategies and impression management tactics (Hatmaker, 2013). Being 'highly visible as women yet invisible as engineers' (Hatmaker, 2013: 384), they construct their professional identity in response to interactions they experience. Gaining acceptance comes at a cost and requires extra work that male engineers do not necessarily need to do (Hatmaker, 2013). Therefore, overcoming marginality and achieving 'invisible (wholly assimilated) bodily status' requires constant negotiation and re-negotiation throughout women's careers to secure their progression (Watts, 2009: 517). Rabe-Hemp (2008: 264) identifies three ways policewomen define their acceptance into police culture: 'through achieving rank, through completing some tough, manful act, or through being different or unique to the typical male police role'. The latter is considered risky, as it encourages women to accentuate their differences and become

more visible. However, those who attempt to frame themselves distinctively from male counterparts are most successful in gaining promotion (Rabe-Hemp, 2008).

Women engage in identity work to negotiate sameness and difference in their workplaces through using discourses of merit, equal chance and hard work (sameness), and discourses of special contribution (difference), drawing on gender stereotypical terms such as emotion specialists (Simpson, Ross-Smith and Lewis, 2010). The latter discourse indicates that divergence can act as a way to become noticed, providing greater opportunity for advancement (Watts, 2009). However, this apparent feminine advantage can also have contradictory outcomes (Simpson et al, 2010). Indeed, the idea that women bring special attributes to male-dominated roles can foster narrow stereotypes around these special qualities being limited to typically feminine-associated attributes, such as empathy (Dodge, Valcore and Gomez, 2011).

### **Theorising embodiment and identity work**

This article explores gendered bodily practices as resources for identity work, understood as ‘anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others’ (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrick, 1996: 115). Workers are involved in ‘forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising’ their notions of themselves (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 626) in order to – through talk and action – sculpt a ‘coherent and distinctive’ self-identity and to influence the social identities (gender, class, ethnicity etc.) which pertain to them in their lived context (Watson, 2008: 129). Identity work is ongoing, open to (re)negotiation and can be contradictory, as identities are fluid and can be modified (Brown, 2015). It involves ‘both discursive (what they *say* about what they do) and practical means (what they *do* to demonstrate the legitimacy of their current knowledge)’ (Courpasson and



Monties, 2017: 33) and is used to sustain personal as well as collective identities (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrick, 1996).

The role bodily practices play in identity construction requires more scholarly attention (Courpasson and Monties, 2017), with studies going beyond the discursive ways in which workers negotiate their identities (Brown, 2015). One cannot be separated from how one is embodied (Burkitt, 1999; Kašperová and Kitching, 2014), as bodily movement informs sense-making and identity construction. Bodies are multi-dimensional, composed of both the material (e.g. parts of the body, movements, gestures, work on physical appearance) and the symbolic (e.g. discourse, signs, language), locked in constant interaction and ‘impossible to separate’, situated within the networks of social relations, and located in time and space (Burkitt, 1999: 95). The symbolic enhances understanding of the practical and embodied, enabling construction of a shared understanding of the world, as bodies are ‘always the object and subject of signification, and of attitudes and judgements, which are socially formed’ (Burkitt, 1999: 99). Bodies are also productive and gendered, and female bodies specifically can become ‘sites of resistance to dominant power relations as well as being channels for their operation’ (Burkitt, 1999: 5).

The corporeality of occupational life and workers’ bodies are often under-theorised in research on identity work, despite influencing the construction of occupational identity (Courpasson and Monties, 2017). For example, Brown’s (2015) review of debates on identity work in organisations, focuses on discursive means, and overlooks the role of embodiment. Conversely, while Courpasson and Monties’ (2017) study explores the notion of physical selfhood of police officers and politicisation of bodies – with the body constituting a resource for identity work that can help resist organisational change – the gender dimension, although

evident in the study's empirical data, was deemed beyond scope. Thus, the uniqueness of this article lies in foregrounding all three interconnected dimensions – that of body, work and gender – to consider how gendered bodily practices constitute resources for identity work.

While focus is usually on workers' individual rather than collective identities, identity work is a group process, which can serve the needs of group members through creation of symbolic resources (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrick, 1996). The value of this collective aspect of identity work will become relevant in relation to brewsters. The context – i.e. the physical spaces of microbreweries and the sector being niche and male-dominated – also contributes significantly to understanding brewsters' identity work. Researchers have argued that 'identity shapes, and is shaped by, embodied practices not only in the social context, through dialogue with others, but also in relation to agents' natural and practical environment' (Kašperová and Kitching, 2014: 439), and thus, building on existing research, more exploration is needed into how workplace contexts affect individual identities (Brown, 2015).

Of interest in this article is how brewsters mobilise their gender and bodies at work; how they frame and narrate accounts of their embodied and gendered selves, on individual as well as collective levels, to give meaning to and sustain their identities. As embodied experiences are often anchored in individuals' experiences of employment (Wolkowitz, 2006), the body/work/gender nexus is central to understanding brewsters' identity work. The body/work/gender nexus is defined here as the shifting and interlinking connections between embodied and gendered attributes, characteristics and practices in the context of work. In other words, the material and symbolic ways in which workers use their bodies and gender at work, and how this shapes their interactions, identities and coping strategies. As such, the body/work/gender nexus constitutes a useful lens to generate insights into gendered

territories of contemporary workplaces and to understand the complexities of women's working lives.

## **Methodology**

This study emerged from previous research on grant funding in the microbrewing sector (Ellis and Bosworth, 2015), where a female interviewee highlighted the distinctive challenges that women brewers encounter in the sector and their under-representation. The sixteen participants in this study were white, female, mostly British (two were Europeans), differed in age (from mid-20s to mid-50s), time in the sector, background and education, and were geographically dispersed (both in rural and urban locations). Some had over a decade of experience in the industry, but many were new (one to three years of experience). Most had previous careers, which included financial services, hospitality, teaching, music, equine and emergency services. While several had science degrees, most received informal training from breweries via voluntary employment and through independent research. They also held different roles: from less experienced and new to brewing, to head brewers and brewery owners. Many were entrepreneurs or aspiring ones, with experiences of working in male-dominated microbrewing environments.

All participants belonged to Project Venus, a women-only network established in 2011 to support women in the industry. By 2015, the network had over 40 members. They communicated through a closed Facebook group and met at regular communal brewing events, where they collectively brewed a recipe and exchanged knowledge. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2015 with brewsters from across the UK, including the founder of the network. The focus of the semi-structured interviews was two-fold. On the individual level, the interest was in embodied work, identity negotiation and narratives of the

working self. On the collective level, the interest was in how the Project Venus network supported women in the industry and helped build the shared narrative. Interviews lasted between 30 to 90 minutes and were conducted face-to-face (during brewing events or at participants' breweries) and via telephone.

Participant observation was used to observe five brewing events. This method allowed for observing how brewsters mobilised their bodies and gender when brewing. Participating in these events enabled the authors to gain trust and build deeper understanding of the brewing process, the physical work involved, and how the network supported members. Fieldwork notes and photographs were taken during these events. These captured the material aspects of the brewing process in addition to the discursive elements.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to explore the subjective and embodied experiences of brewsters. In IPA, participant voice and worldview are prioritised and analysis is developed around 'substantial verbatim excerpts from the data' (Reid et al., 2005: 22). Interviews were transcribed and coded, with emerging themes identified. Taking the interpretative stance, participants' experiences were made sense of through the process of coding, organising and interpreting the data.

What follows is an exploration of brewsters' embodied and gendered experiences (i.e. body/work/gender nexus) and identity work, illustrated through narratives of their working lives and centred around four themes: (1) Embodied work and navigating the physical landscape of microbreweries; (2) Material and symbolic ways brewsters *downplay* gender to, individually and collectively, negotiate physical competence and suitability; (3) Managing the reactions of others i.e. identity talk via discursive distancing and downplaying embodied visibility; (4) Demonstrating distinctiveness and collective contribution i.e. identity talk via

discursive *foregrounding* of gender when non-physical aspects are involved and through belonging to a women-only network. These themes draw on the conceptualisation of identity work as both individual self-presentation and a group process (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrick, 1996), taking into account the discursive aspects of identity construction, work on physical appearance and selective association with others (Snow and Anderson, 1987: 1348), as well as recognition that bodies are gendered, situated within the networks of social relations, where the symbolic is interlocked and inseparable from the material (Burkitt, 1999).

### **Embodied work and navigating masculine spaces**

Bodily performance is an integral part of brewers' work. Brewsters described in interviews, and demonstrated during brew days, how they managed the brewing process and how important their bodies were at different stages: from 'mashing in' (adding grain and hot water to the mash tun), digging out the mash (spent grain), adding hops, to the hard physical work involved in cleaning of equipment. This physical engagement with the activity and the product constitutes the craft of brewing (Thurnell-Read, 2014). While there are tools available, and in larger breweries various automated systems are in use, microbreweries are small-scale and less automated, with many tasks performed manually. Brewsters emphasised the physical competence required to do their work:

It is very, very physical work. Brewing is all about intense periods of very, very physical activity and then lots of sitting around waiting for things to happen, or boil, or brew. [...] You need to be physically fit to brew if you're in a small brewery where you don't have much automation (Brewster6)

Brewsters perceived breweries as masculine workspaces in terms of worker composition as well as in equipment weight and size, with tools and machinery having been traditionally designed for standard male bodies. Unsuitability of equipment is common in formerly male-dominated environments that have seen women enter (Smith, 2013; Wolkowitz, 2006), and for brewsters this was a daily barrier to navigate:

[I]t's just the size of the equipment. Some of the equipment I have to work with is very large and heavy [...] I have to ask for certain jobs to be done for me when I'd like to be able to do it myself, but the item is just too heavy or too big, or can't get a blooming nut undone because it's just too tightly done up. "Oh, can you undo that for me?" That's a downside for me. I just want to crack on and get on with it (Brewster7)

To mitigate this, brewsters developed mechanisms to make these spaces more suitable for their physical build: 'I do have a little box in the brewery which means I can reach stuff. I stand on a little beer crate because I'm short' (Brewster1). Also, while rarely the case, when involved in brewery design, they made their working environments accessible to those (not only women) who are shorter: 'Certain things in the brewery we built, specifically, a little bit lower so I could reach them. Again, that's a height thing. If you've got a short bloke, he'd probably do exactly the same' (Brewster1). In such situations, the small-scale nature of microbreweries created opportunities for women to shape and negotiate their physical working landscapes, resulting in personalised workplaces. However, this opportunity was only available to those in a position of influence or when a new brewery was built.

On the whole, brewsters experienced breweries as masculine spaces, with masculine norms predominant and female bodies seemingly out of place. Identity work was thus undertaken by brewsters to redefine the notion of the ideal worker (Hatmaker, 2013) and

challenge the stereotype of the brewer as male. Brewsters considered their collective role as reframing this: 'It [having more women brewers] really challenges that stereotype they have in their head of a middle-aged man probably with a beard, socks and sandals and a beer belly' (Brewster1).

### **Negotiating physical competence**

Due to the physical demands of the role and the sector being male-dominated, brewsters continuously needed to prove themselves to others. In addition to making physical adaptations, brewsters discursively constructed their working selves as physically able, accentuating characteristics typically ascribed as male: 'I've always been quite strong anyway; I've always been quite fit. I've always done rock climbing and I do [church] bell ringing [...] It means I'm quite strong' (Brewster1). Adopting qualities associated with masculinity, such as endurance and strength, is one behaviour used by women in male-dominated industries where they experience scrutiny over their physicality (Denissen, 2010; Woodfield, 2016). Brewsters emphasised physical competence and strong bodies in their everyday work: 'I'm quite strong I carried on Friday in the sweltering heat a quarter of a tonne of malt upstairs [...] I'm not superwoman but I am stronger than most of my female mates that I know' (Brewster11).

This also manifested through brewsters' appearance and their work clothes. During brew days, they expressed pride with their functional appearance, their hardworking sweaty bodies and their nonconformity with perceived feminine norms. When brewing, they wore functional uniforms of baggy trousers, tatty t-shirts and steel toe cap boots, which dimmed their femininity but also signalled their competence and ease with tools, and their practical approach. Clothes can serve to 'announce identities, show values, express moods and propose

attitudes' (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrick, 1996: 118) and brewsters used these to show suitability and readiness for hard physical work.

By highlighting physical strength, ability and agility, brewsters downplayed the significance of their gender and emphasised more typically masculine qualities to avoid differential treatment. Active gender dimming has also been observed in other male-dominated sectors (Denissen, 2010; Hatmaker, 2013; Woodfield, 2016). Through this, brewsters created a discourse of strength-based occupational appropriateness and situated themselves in opposition to those physically weaker by highlighting that few people, of either gender, were capable of this work. All this served to challenge assumptions about the role being primarily reserved for men. Brewsters distanced themselves from stereotypically feminine behaviour and contended that it was not gender but bodily techniques that made one capable:

I think if you are a woman coming into a physical environment [...] and you play the girl card all the time, "Oh, I can't lift that package" effectively, you're not fit for that job. [...] It's not about being a girl or being a guy, it's about your physical ability and the way that you approach things and you problem solve' (Brewster1).

Accentuating physical strength, bodily performance and techniques, and downplaying gender in relation to physical work, constituted an integral element of brewsters' identity work. While acknowledging the limitations of their bodies and the need to be 'a bit more careful', brewsters stressed their acquired body techniques and the everyday tactics developed to cope with physical demands: 'When you find the right way, there's no end to what you can do. It's just learning what's best for you' (Brewster10). These negated their physical disadvantage and highlighted agility:



I've got a technique of getting into the copper. I could be a gymnast, I have to get my legs so high up in the air [...] I'm quite surprised at how flexible you have to be to get in the copper. I'd like to see a fifty-year-old man do it [...] Because when I get in my copper, I'm like arse in the air, leg in the air, it's quite funny. But yes, you do develop techniques, ways that you find easy for you to work your system (Brewster10).

Within the social environment of collaborative brew days, brewsters used humour to accentuate their physical achievement and mocked large masculine muscles by highlighting the strength of the most 'weedy' brewster and jokingly telling each other not to use 'the weak word'. Great pride was attributed to the physical competence of the smallest and aged bodies. Flexing their biceps and assuming body building poses after lifting heavy objects, they satirised their strength whilst maintaining an undertone of physical capability. This safe space of collaborative brews allowed for the strengthening of a brewster identity around shared characteristics and challenges, which reinforced their belonging.

### **Managing the reactions of others**

Brewsters' identity work also involved building resilience to prejudices through developing mechanisms to discursively manage the reactions of others, as their embodied selves attracted attention and their gendered bodies were salient in how others perceived them. As bodies are subjects of others' attitudes and judgements (Burkitt, 1999), diverging from the invisible central occupational type (Woodfield, 2016) of the male brewer led to their non-male bodies having increased visibility and encountering resistance:

He said, “Well, your boss must lift the malt for you,” and I’m saying, “No, no, no. I do all that”. “Oh, no, no, no. You can’t do that. You’re only a little thing”. “No. I can actually”. “No,” and he just couldn’t believe that I do the physical side of it (Brewster2)

[S]ome of them [men] absolutely love helping women, they get a real buzz off it [...] But other men are just like, “No, you can do it, I’m just going to watch you”. [...] They can help you, but they don’t want to help you because they want to see you do it. It’s like you’ve got to prove yourself to them (Brewster10)

While a focus of the male gaze, brewsters on occasions also felt ignored, as their female bodies were seen as out-of-place (Watts, 2007):

They expect to walk into the brew house and see men working there [...] An old chap wandered into the brewery to collect some hops, but we didn’t have any. He said, “Oh. Oh, okay. Do you think? Can I speak to one of the chaps then?”. “Well, it’s me you need to speak to really. I look after all the beer and the brewing” (Brewster7)

Through identity talk, brewsters downplayed these situations as non-malicious banter, attributing them as generational: ‘he was probably seventy-odd. So he’s of that generation where he completely wouldn’t expect a woman to be working in a brewery’ (Brewster7). They also normalised them as occurrences women traditionally tolerated:

[P]eople presume that you’re the secretary of whatever, but, you know, as a woman you’ve put up with that all your life haven’t you, so you just... get on with it. [...] I tend to find that it’s all fairly good natured ribbing, if you can give back as good as you get then you put them on the back foot (Brewster15)

Brewster identity was formed partly in response to sexist attitudes. Discursively downplaying experiences of sexism and any undesired embodied visibility their bodies attracted, brewsters discursively constructed their brewer selves as boundary pushing innovators making meaningful contributions individually and collectively: 'I think from a lady's perspective, it does take a very unique kind of person to want to, and be able to do this, and enjoy it. ... And it is pretty wonderful to break that man-woman boundary' (Brewster4). In this way, they created a discourse of exceptionalness through their commitment and passion: '[W]e [brewsters] have to really put our mind to what we're doing, we have to have a lot of motivation. When we're knackered, and you get bloody knackered brewing, you still get up and carry on because you love it' (Brewster10). Their passion for the craft superseded previous 'mundane' job experiences as well as the physical demands of brewing and sexist attitudes, as they were crafting a 'dream job for life'. Noting that women tended to enter the industry after much preparation and in anticipation of difficulties, brewsters constructed other women in the sector as exceptional:

I can't think of any bad female brewers and I suspect the reason that that might be is because it's such a male dominated industry that [...] the ladies that are involved at the moment might have done a bit more research and might have taken a bit more time before launching themselves into it. Because of the fear of rejection or being told they can't do it because they're a woman (Brewster11)

### **Demonstrating distinctiveness and collective contribution**

Acknowledging that brewing involves physical work, during interviews brewsters emphasised that this comprised only part of the role and constructed their identity by accentuating non-physical aspects (e.g. skills and knowledge) and collective contribution, thereby reframing the

discourse of physical suitability to a domain where they could capitalise on perceived female strengths. They developed a discursive framing to communicate distinctiveness to male brewers and established their working selves as confident in the skilled part of the role (e.g. scientific knowledge and creative approach). If gender was downplayed in relation to physical work to show sameness with male brewers (i.e. physical competence), it was advantageously foregrounded in relation to non-physical work and expertise, such as recipe design, to show difference, thus positioning women as, individually and collectively, bringing new perspectives to brewing. In this way, brewsters constructed an occupational identity driven by innovation and experimentation, combining science with art through sensory and embodied labour, through introducing new ingredients and flavours:

We're [women] not hindered in the use of any ingredient really [...] Men, I think, may tend to conform to styles parameters, whereas women might think, "Oh, well actually, I'm going to use liquorice, liquorice root and vanilla pods in my next porter", because I know that a chocolaty porter in liquorice and vanillas is a fabulous combination. I might even put a bit of chilli in there for a bit of a kick. Whereas I don't know so many guys that would just throw caution to the wind and chuck a load of different ingredients in [...] It's just that they're [women] freer with a wide range of ingredients than men would be (Brewster7)

I use my science to work backwards in terms of how much malt to put in to get the right strength beer, but everything else is just a bit – it's the art bit of it [...] I'm both [art and science] (Brewster1).

To highlight women's contribution, brewsters forged a distinctive identity which was achieved both on an individual and collective level through the retelling of a collective narrative

within Project Venus that, historically, brewing was done by women and they were reclaiming the role. This narrative was reinforced during brew days and through the online group. Brewsters also used feminine deference tactically (Denissen, 2010), understanding how being a woman could constitute a competitive advantage, and used this to draw attention to their products and change perceptions of who brews beer:

[I]t has helped the marketing side of things, as I say people are very interested in why is there a woman brewing, so I think that combined with the fact that we actively try and do good marketing. You know the newspaper was all very excited to find out there was a lady brewing in Derbyshire [...] And landlords as well actually are quite often quite interested (Brewster11)

[I]t's sort of not the sort of thing you're supposed to say these days. But actually I find if you're dealing with people in pubs and they are male [...] it does help to be a woman because you can flirt a bit with them and I'm afraid it works. You know, they quite like talking to a woman instead of a hardnosed businessman (Brewster12)

Highlighting the feminine advantage, framing the physical demands as only part of the role and actively downplaying them by highlighting their scientific credentials as well as innovative approach, brewsters discursively differentiated themselves from male brewers. In this way, negotiating sameness and difference (Simpson et al, 2010), they affirmed their collective contribution to the industry by drawing on aptitudes less associated with masculinity.

## **Discussion**

Through foregrounding the body/work/gender nexus, this article has shown how women brewers engage in identity work to construct a distinctive brewster identity. Their identity work involves both material (e.g. bodily practices, everyday tactics and working with tools) and symbolic (e.g. discursive constructions of strength, gender dimming) means (Burkitt, 1999); it entails nuanced shifting between *downplaying* and *foregrounding* gender to emphasise sameness as well as difference (Simpson et al, 2010), contribution as well as physical competence; and is enacted on both individual and collective levels, with the latter supported through a women-only network. Viewing identity work of women in male-dominated occupations through the body/work/gender nexus provides researchers with the means to understand the significant and nuanced role gendered bodily practices play, appreciate the shifting ways in which corporealities and gender identities are negotiated as well as exploring the social processes of identity construction and the impact of physical working environments. This approach helps move understandings of identity work past a largely disembodied view of work and workers as well as beyond the masculine/feminine dichotomy, showing how women in male-dominated occupations involving physical work talk about and utilise their gendered bodies to gain acceptance and differentiate themselves.

The article's first contribution lies in centralising the body/work nexus (Wolkowitz, 2006) – through reconsidering the connections between work, gender and body in the conceptualisation of identity work – and embodied practices within physical working environments (Kašperová and Kitching, 2014). In male-dominated environments, male bodies are constructed as ideal and masculine norms predominate (Hatmaker, 2013; Woodfield, 2016). Women brewers negotiate this within their workplace, where their bodies attract attention or are ignored for diverging from the stereotyped brewer. Bodily performance is both

central to the brewing process and an important aspect of their identity work. In brewsters' accounts, negotiating the physicality of the role and navigating the physical working environment is a recurring theme. Aware of how they differ from the ideal, brewsters engage in identity work to claim a space within both the workplace and the industry. They do so through material means, namely demonstrating physical competence, adapting their physical workspaces, and developing bodily techniques to use tools and machinery primarily designed for male bodies. Brewsters symbolically frame their working bodies as strong, fit and able, constructed in opposition to other 'weaker' workers, of both sexes. Simultaneously, they acknowledge the limitations of their bodies and develop everyday tactics to practically work around these. Thus, their identity work takes a nuanced approach, shifting between emphasising physical competencies and acknowledging limitations.

The second contribution is in highlighting the interconnection between enactment of identity work on individual and collective levels, with the latter playing a validating role. Women brewers are actively involved in collective identity making. Belonging to Project Venus enables the brewster identity to be strengthened through bringing together otherwise geographically dispersed women brewers. It also supports the construction of an overarching brewster narrative and gives members a sense of belonging, pride and significance beyond individual self-presentation. This reveals a collective effort to redraw the boundaries of the brewer's role, overcome resistance from peers and customers, and revive the term 'brewster' (Bennett, 1996). Thus, their identity work is not enacted in isolation but instead draws on a broader narrative built collectively. The collective enables for 'joint creation of the symbolic resources' upon which individual identities are reinforced (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock, 1996: 115). As brewsters are under-represented in the sector's formal networks and their

breweries are geographically dispersed, belonging to Project Venus reinforces their distinctive brewster identity and creates a sense of community. Building on Courpasson and Monties (2017), this article highlights the importance of the physical self in identity work but also broadens their work by recognising the impact of gendered bodily practices as well as the enactment of identity work at a collective level. While individual self-presentation is influential in identity work, it is collective identity making that facilitates the reshaping of the brewer's role and the construction of a shared narrative. Just as beer is brewed collectively during brew days, so is their brewster identity.

Third, by exploring microbrewing environments, this article extends knowledge on gendered workplaces. Women brewers perform a physically demanding gendered occupation and this constitutes an important context to their identity work. On the one hand, brewsters actively downplay gender to gain acceptance and create a discourse of sameness (Simpson et al, 2010). This is consistent with studies on women in male-dominated occupations that show women engage in gender dimming to gain acceptance (Hatmaker, 2013; Woodfield, 2016). Here, downplaying gender occurs in specific contexts, such as when discussing physical demands. Brewsters engage in demonstrating physical competence and qualities considered masculine, as they do not want to be perceived as weaker or unable. They downplay the importance of gender but emphasise physical abilities to show pride that the work can be performed by smaller but physically fit bodies.

On the other hand, the findings show that brewster identity work also involves foregrounding gender to communicate distinctiveness and to advantageously differentiate brewsters (and their products) in this small but competitive sector. Conscious that their embodied visibility attracts media attention, brewsters actively use it in promotion.



Deliberately drawing on stereotypical feminine qualities in interactions with clients also forms part of their identity work. Most importantly, brewsters emphasise gender differences when articulating the collective contribution of women brewers to the industry, accentuating innovation in recipe design and the creative use of diverse ingredients. In this way, they construct a distinctive brewster identity that is situated outside the archetypal male craftworker (Holmes, 2015; Sennett, 2008). Thus, identity work is leveraged not only to achieve acceptance and invisible bodily status (Watts, 2009) but to advantageously demonstrate distinctiveness and collective contribution.

Fourth, in the context of the resurgence in craft businesses (Holmes, 2015), another contribution lies in exploring worker identities in niche contexts. Providing insight into the working lives of female brewers furthers understanding of the role of the brewer, moving away from the archetypal male craftworker (Holmes, 2015; Sennett, 2008), problematising the role and broadening understanding of the female craftworker experience. In this way, the article joins Holmes (2015) in challenging conventional discourses of craftwork as a male domain. It shows that while the small-scale nature of craft businesses can provide divergence opportunities for women, adaption of physical working environments and ownership of outcomes, this requires increased effort and is a complex process that shifts between foregrounding and downplaying gender; demonstrating physical strength but also acknowledging the limitations of their working bodies; accentuating difference as well as communicating suitability and passion for the craft. Rather than idealising the craft of brewing with the pressures of physical work absent (Thurnell-Read, 2014), brewsters focus on everyday realities, resisting stereotypes and navigating limitations of their working environments. While brewsters interviewed hold diverse roles (brewery owners, head brewers, junior brewers), are

of different backgrounds and geographically dispersed, the challenges encountered and tactics adopted are similar. By constructing a distinctive brewster identity – through individual self-presentation and collective creation of shared narrative – women brewers assert their contribution and redefine the role of the brewer.

## **Conclusion**

Through exploring the connection between body, gender and work, this article set out to reaffirm the value of looking at embodiment in identity construction research, rebalance often masculinised understandings of working bodies in male-dominated occupations and challenge discourses of craftwork as a male domain as well as recognising how collective aspects of identity work relate to personal identities. Using the context of microbreweries and capturing the embodied, gendered and collective dimensions of brewers' work, it aimed to expand knowledge on worker corporealities and gendered workplaces as well as extending understanding of women's identity work in physically demanding male-dominated occupations. It proposed that these should become more central to scholarly exploration, as this approach allows a move away from the notion that identity work is disembodied, discursive and involves solely individual self-presentation.

As such, the article contributes to research on women in male-dominated occupations and identity construction (Watts, 2009; Woodfield, 2016), as well as the niche sector of microbreweries (Thurnell-Read, 2014). In particular, it extends conceptualisation of identity work (Brown, 2015; Courpasson and Monties, 2017; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock, 1996; Snow and Anderson, 1987; Watson, 2008) and develops new knowledge on female brewer identity construction. While there are commonalities with experiences of women in other male-dominated sectors, such as engineering (Hatmaker, 2013), fire services (Woodfield,

2016), and construction (Denissen, 2010), much can be learnt from brewsters' lived experiences, how they transgress gendered occupational boundaries and collectively brew a shared identity.

This article aimed to challenge the under-appreciation of female worker bodies in male-dominated environments to better understand the 'immediate situated activity of their work' (Healy et al., 2006: 291). Through foregrounding the body/work/gender nexus in identity work research and bringing in the collective dimension, new understandings of contemporary workplaces can be found and opportunities to deepen conceptualisation of gendered working environments arise, in particular in male-dominated environments where physical demands remain integral and female-only networks are active. This study's focus was limited to brewsters and a single women-only network. To complement this, more research into the gendered territories of manual craft industries and the role women-only craft networks play in collective identity construction is needed. There is also scope to further the exploration of the impact of physical workspaces on workers' embodied experiences in other contexts and the need to further reconsider how physical working environments meet the needs of diverse workers.

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